

rushing rivers and a lilac breeze by 10pintsofsacrifice

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Summary:

snapshots from mike wheeler's life growing up.

rushing rivers and a lilac breeze

the first time you notice how different you are is at five years old, at a christmas party among all your cousins in a dress you don't want to be wearing. all of your girl cousins don't mind all the red and green sparkles, while the bow around your waist comes undone for the fourth time. nancy looks so pretty, in her long-sleeved red dress. you just look weird.

as soon as you're allowed, you're out of the dress and in a t-shirt and shorts. with your curly chin-length hair, you look like just another one of the boys. you don't understand the quiet tug of longing in your stomach, not yet. you just grin and holler and scrape your knees - no, you do *not* cry - like every other kid your age does, even though nancy swears she was never this wild.

when you get home you don't sleep for what feels like hours, staring up at the ceiling with burning eyes that won't close. you think about how it's not just at the party that you've felt wrong. sometimes it's nancy in a pink sundress, looking so right and like she belongs, while you look uncomfortable in shiny black mary janes.

it's even worse on sundays. your mom forces you into some dress you don't even like that was probably nancy's at some point, while your dad gets to wear a tucked-in collared shirt with a tie and nice formal dress pants. *that's* what you'd rather be wearing, you think. not that your mom would ever let you go anywhere dressed like that. you're supposed to dress like a lady. but what happens if you don't *want* to dress like a lady, what happens then?

what if you don't want to be a lady? the thought's never crossed your mind before. you don't even think it's a thing that you can just decide.

when you do fall asleep, it's restless and dreamless; it's kind of like falling, only endlessly. you wake up every few hours until it's finally eight in the morning, the acceptable time for you to wake everyone up, bouncing elatedly down the stairs, yelling "it's christmas!"

you try to shove down those thoughts from the night before.

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when you're seven years old, there is this boy named will byers. he challenges everything you thought you knew about boys, with his soft voice and big brown eyes and shaking hands. a boy with a sketchpad always under his arm, with a pencil always tucked behind his ear. he is soft in a way you didn't know boys could be soft. he is different from every other boy you've ever met.

(you think you want to be like him.)

troy harrington doesn't like boys like will, you find out quickly. troy harrington doesn't like boys like will at *all*. troy harrington rips up will's sketches, pulls his hair and pushes him down, laughs when will finally starts to cry. boys like troy harrington don't get along with boys like will byers. that's just how it is.

(but why is will's softness a bad thing?)

girls like you protect boys like will, you tell yourself. girlhood still fits wrong on you; like it's not quite right, won't ever be right, won't ever fit you like it fits nancy, like it fits girls like jennifer hayes. it feels like a bad taste in your mouth. they tell you that you'll grow into it. but what if you don't want to? what if?

(what if you're not actually a girl at all?)

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will cuts your hair in his bathroom when you're ten, the harsh lighting bouncing off your curls almost threateningly. you still haven't told him why. you think that deep down some part of him already knows about you; already knows about all the predetermined puzzle pieces that don't fit. when he calls you susan it feels wrong. you whisper that mike would be better.

he stops for a moment and turns to you - you're already a foot above him and you're only supposed to get taller. he turns to you and looks at you with those eyes that say *it's okay* - and you're crying, tears coming faster than you can wipe them away, spilling your secret with trembling lips. you finally tell him, *i don't think i've ever been a girl*.

he hugs you, tells you that he loves you all the same.

that's when he calls you mike for the first time.

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"what do you want me to call you?" nancy asks you that night.

she wrapped an arm around you when you started crying, and you lean into the warmth she offers. you take a deep shaky breath and tell her michael is good, she can call you mike or something for short, you want your middle name to be james instead of diane.

(saying your new name to yourself, michael james wheeler, is a feeling that you're pretty sure will never stop feeling some type of revolutionary. you're never going to get over it.)

"then mike it is," she says, eyes soft. she carefully laces her fingers with yours. she's smiling this gentle smile, something that makes you feel safe and warm all at once. "have you told mom and dad? what about lucas, dustin and will? it's...you now, it's okay if you haven't told them yet, because...i'm sure this is already a lot to deal with all on its own, let alone telling other people. i'm glad that you told me, i'm very proud of you for that. is there anything that i - "

"i told will," you shakily breathe out, free hand fidgeting with the hem of your sweater. "he told me that i'm still his best friend. he hugged me. told me that no matter what he'll always be right beside me."

"will's always been a good kid," she murmurs. you smile down at your feet. will is kind and gentle, the way that you want to be, the way that he's always been. it's one of the many things that you love about him, his ability to make softness into this quiet kind of bravery. he's always there to remind you that boys are allowed to be gentle and kind just like girls are.

nancy squeezes your hand and you let out a sigh, something you've been doing a lot lately. "i don't know how to tell dustin and lucas," you whisper. "i can't even begin to imagine what i'm gonna tell mom and dad. i'm scared of what they're going to say."

nancy frowns and tells you that no matter what she's always going to have your back. you smile because you know you can believe her, but it doesn't take the anxiety out of your stomach, doesn't take the nervous pins and needles out of your fingertips.

she sighs and pulls you close to her, squeezing you once and then just letting you rest against her, quiet, gentle, a companionable silence. you stay that way until your mother comes in to announce that dinner's done, a surprised but fond smile on her face when she sees the two of you; thankfully she seems to be over her anger from earlier about your newly-cut hair. you race nancy down the stairs and win.

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you know you have to tell them.

you're scared.

you're sure that they'll love you all the same.

that doesn't make it easier.

you end up on the verge of tears when you finally tell your mom. you'd gone clothes shopping, just the two of you - you're eleven and finally starting to outgrow your clothes, and your mother is holding a soft pink sweater up to your chest when the tears prick your eyes, white-hot and acid sharp, and it all came tumbling out, every little detail that you'd rehearsed in the mirror for countless days and nights finally spilling over, tears choking the words out, the heavy tangle of feelings in your chest loosening. she drops everything so she can hold you to her chest.

you tell her that you don't just mean that you're a tomboy. you tell her that you mean you're a *boy* boy. that your name is michael james wheeler instead of susan diane. that you're a boy just like will, lucas and dustin, that this is not a joke and please don't be angry. she listens to every single thing that you say, never once interrupting or looking anything other than understanding, and when you're done she holds you close and whispers *my son*, which causes another ugly-crying spell all on its own.

“i love your name,” your mom murmurs gently. she cards her fingers through your hair. you’re crying in the middle of the aisle, getting the occasional weird look from the people passing by. you’re just thankful for your mother, her gentle grace and her understanding. “it suits a boy like you well.”

you swipe a hand over your face and mutter, “you really like it?”

she just smiles at you.

“of course,” she says, voice soft like nancy’s a year before, and that damned tangle in your chest finally unknots itself, and it feels like maybe you can finally breathe. this is the relief you’ve been looking for. the acceptance that you’ve been hoping would come. for all the ways this could have gone, this is definitely the best outcome, the one you’ve locked away in your mind. the hope of it felt too heavy. you let the cluster of feelings punch the breath back into you.

you feel yourself being gently led away from the girls’ section, and a fresh wave of tears nearly rolls down your cheeks when you look up. your mother says, “it wouldn’t do to shop in that section now, would it? you’re not a girl. i have to do some shopping with my son. this would be the correct place to do so.”

“i love you so much,” you tell her breathlessly. you think that maybe you have never loved her more.

“well, i love you too,” she tells you with glowing eyes, “to the moon and back and more than all the stars.”

“I don’t know why i was afraid to tell you.” the words come out shaky but truthful. you’d practiced telling her, in front of the mirror or with nancy until you could say it without stuttering.

“i don’t know why either,” your mom laughs, ruffling your hair.

“this is good,” you manage.

you end up with three sweaters, two flannels, and around four or five pairs of jeans. more than a little successful.

she helps you clear out your closet, puts some of your old clothes

away in totes, to be saved for holly.

you fall asleep grinning, happier than you've been in weeks.

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your dad doesn't get it.

you didn't expect him to, but a little part of you hoped that maybe he would. he calls you he and mike but none of it feels genuine. it feels like he's only doing it to please your mom, not because it's actually who you are.

sometimes you wish he didn't say anything at all.

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when you're twelve years old, your best friend will byers goes missing, and all hell breaks loose.

he didn't come home that night when he left your house. they found his bike in the woods and that's been the only sign of him. if only he'd stayed back a little longer, if only you or dustin had accompanied him home, if only jonathan hadn't been working that night. all the if onlys in the world won't bring will back.

things like this don't happen in the quiet little town of hawkins, indiana. things like this are meant to happen anywhere but here.

where's will?

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"i bet she escaped from pennhurst," lucas hisses while the strange girl you'd found in the storm changes. she'd been soaking wet in only a large t-shirt. she's unlike any other girl you've ever seen in your life, hair buzzed short and barefoot, all dirty and heaving like she'd run a marathon.

"from where?" dustin murmurs. you roll your eyes and find yourself staring at the bathroom door, almost completely closed save for a small crack, and your heart aches for this girl.

“from the nuthouse in kerley county,” lucas mutters.

you give him what you hope is a stern look, fiddling with the hem of your shirt, stomach aching and dustin asks, “you got a lot of family there?”

“bite me.”

the three of you argue among yourselves until you’ve got a loose plan in place. the girl stays here with you for the night and in the morning you’ll figure it out. when dustin and lucas leave you fall against the couch with a sigh of relief, guiltily thankful to be alone with your thoughts.

“hey, um - i never asked your name,” you say when the girl settles in the makeshift fort you’d made for her, looking as exhausted as you feel, eyes already half-lidded as she wraps herself in the soft blankets. for a moment she looks apprehensive but she looks at you carefully, the ghost of a not-quite smile on her lips, and she rolls up her sleeve.

“is that real?” you ask, wide-eyed at the sight before you. in small, black lettering across her veins is the number eleven. “sorry, i’ve just never seen a kid with a tattoo before. what’s it mean?”

she just holds her arm out to you, almost insistent. “eleven?” a nod. “that’s your name? eleven?” another nod.

you can’t exactly say you were expecting that, but this night is already weird enough. now is totally not the time, but you catch yourself admiring her soft features. she has big brown eyes restless and delicate twitchy hands just like - you banish the thought as soon as it comes. you can’t bear to think about will right now, not when don’t know if he’s okay; just hoping only goes so far.

“um, well, my name’s mike. short for michael,” you say. it feels good - feels right to use your name. it’s different because she didn’t know the you before, before you had your name, before your even-cut short hair, before the striped collared shirts and baggy jeans. to her there has never been any other version of you, and there’s something so entirely freeing about it, something that makes you a little bit braver.

“maybe we can call you el - short for eleven.”

there’s the not-quite smile, the slight nod of her head in agreement, and you feel a gentle heat spreading over your cheeks.

“um, well, okay,” you murmur around a yawn, sitting up out of the couch and cracking your back. “night, el.”

you give her a small smile when she says, “night, mike.”

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the night that they pull will’s body out of the quarry, the crushing grief rouses something aching and ugly in you.

you shout, “”mike,” what? you were supposed to help us find him alive! you said he was *alive!* why’d you lie to us? what is wrong with you? what is *wrong* with you?”

“mike, come on,” lucas murmurs at the same time dustin says, “don’t do this, man.”

you force yourself away from her glossy eyes and out of lucas’ and dustin’s grips.

you cry all the way home.

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when you take the leap over the cliff, you don’t expect to stop mid-air and slowly start rising back up seemingly all on your own.

you know who it is the moment your back hits the dirt and you have never been more grateful. when you’re safe on the ground, you see her with narrowed eyes and clenched fists, and you know right then that troy’s going to get the ass-kicking of a lifetime; with a toss of her head there’s the crack of his arm and he drops the butterfly knife. when he and james take off running, she collapses.

her adam’s apple bobs with her sobbing, and when your knees hit the ground beside her she only apologizes. it breaks your heart when she looks you in the eyes and shakily murmurs, “the gate, i opened it -

i'm the monster."

"no," you whisper, taking her hand. "no, el, you're not the monster. you saved me. do you understand? you *saved* me."

if she minds how tightly you're holding her, she doesn't say anything, instead folding against you and dustin. you have never been happier to have her in your arms.

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when she frowns at herself in the mirror, asking if she's still pretty, you fight past your heart in your throat and tell her, "yeah, pretty. *really* pretty," because she is and you can't stop thinking about it.

you don't quite know realized she was like you. when you did, though, you told her that the dress really belonged to you, and with an honest smile she laced

your fingers together and called you pretty; you had to fight the urge to kiss her again.

you would've kissed her if not for dustin and lucas.

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she's gone and you don't know what to do with herself in her aftermath, because it kind of feels like when she went she took your heart with her.

you cry for days, on and off, stopping only to be sick and for dinner. you can't bear to take her fort down. your mother tells you that she's sorry and nancy lets you sleep in her bed when the nightmares are too much.

there are still things to be happy about. even though he's sick and tired all the time you finally have will back safe and sound. you just wish that to get one friend back you didn't have to lose another, because you think maybe will would've liked her.

you're not the only one that misses her, but none of you are ready to talk about it. the two of you had something that no one else could

understand, something that only two people like you could share.
you'll try to keep that in mind when things get hard.

and you won't forget her.